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Reagan on the Defense

The president's own party delivers a sharp rebuke to his military buildup.

By the time Ronald Reagan put in a call to Senate Budget Committee chairman Pete V. Domenici, the votes were lined up, the budget numbers had been written on a big green chalkboard and the clerk was ready to call the roll. But Domenici, his teeth clenched with anger, nevertheless excused himself, stubbing out yet another Merit cigarette as he made his way to the phone booth marked "Senators Only." Domenici listened politely, his face noticeably reddening as Reagan barked into the phone: "I'm the president and I want you to hold off for a while. People on that committee are up for re-election. They're going to be coming to me for help."

Reagan's threat came too late. After Domenici hung up the phone, he joined all but four Republicans on the budget committee in voting for a defense-spending increase that came to only half what the president had wanted. Although the vote was as much symbolic as substantive, it was Reagan's sharpest rebuke yet from his own party—and perhaps his biggest defeat on Capitol Hill. Even his prime-time appeal to the nation a fortnight before had produced what New Jersey Rep. Marge Roukema called "a conspicuous silence," suggesting that the Great Communicator may have taken his case to the public once too often (page 23)—and that he had badly misjudged its mood.

"I was in Ankeny and Des Moines, in Red Oak and Atlantic," said conservative Iowa Sen. Charles Grassley, ticking off the places he had visited during the Easter recess. "People told me flat out that they were concerned about waste and abuse and mismanagement in the Pentagon. And these weren't left-wing crazies. They were blue-collar workers and veterans—people who elected Ronald Reagan and elected me. They said: 'Turn off the spigot!'"

Growing public and congressional hostility to the administration's hard-line military stance is likely to cause Reagan even bigger problems in the weeks ahead. For example, a presidential commission is soon expected to unveil a new MX deployment plan that seems to call into question the very foundation of Reagan's defense strategy (page 24). Although the administration was cheered last week by a revised—and softened—version of a pastoral letter by Ro-

man Catholic bishops opposing nuclear weapons, arms talks with the Soviet Union may be permanently stalled and Kenneth Adelman—Reagan's choice to head the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency—seems headed this week for a close and contentious confirmation vote. Even an uptick in the economy hasn't softened opposition to Reagan's defense buildup: traveling to Pittsburgh for a jobs-retraining conference last week, he drew an angry crowd of 4,000 blue-collar supporters who held signs like "Bread Not Bombs."

Message: The message was seemingly lost on Reagan, just as it had been earlier in the week after a tense meeting with Senate Republicans. GOP leaders had hoped to convince Reagan that federal budget deficits and the public mood would not accept his request for \$46.3 billion in extra military spending. Secretary of State George Shultz insisted that a vote against Reagan would "send the wrong signal" to the Soviets, and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger's self-righteous, all-or-nothing attitude only stiffened the resolve of some senators to fight the president. But it was a visibly angry Reagan who had the last word: "When are we going to have the guts to stand up for what's right instead of what's popular?"

But what's "right" by Reagan has become increasingly less popular with the American public. "That consensus . . . you once felt out there to recoup on the military isn't there anymore," says Republican House leader Robert Michel. Indeed, polls show that Americans are increasingly skeptical of large defense budget increases, and Reagan's foreign-policy approval rating has been steadily sapped by events in Central America and the failure to realize any real progress at the arms-negotiating table. He has repeatedly ignored or rebuffed natural allies like the conservative Grassley, who argue that there is enough waste in the Pentagon to keep budget increases to a minimum without endangering national security. And Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Thayer, who has consistently argued for a reordering of defense priorities, has apparently been neutralized by Weinberger and has had virtually no impact on the shaping of the administration's military policy.

Flag Flying: Meanwhile, Weinberger and national-security adviser William Clark—along with CIA Director William Casey and United Nations Ambassador Jeane J. Kirkpatrick—have prodded Reagan to take a

more muscular approach to foreign-policy issues. "Clark and Weinberger want to go off the cliff with the flag flying," complains one top Reagan adviser. The two seized tactical control of the defense-budget lobbying blitz, and Clark barred other top Reagan aides

from strategic deliberations. And along with Weinberger, Clark refused to compromise on the Pentagon budget—even though a little flexibility might have enabled the administration to win a good deal more of its requested increases. Privately, top aides

blamed the two for the Senate loss, even though in public, the White House was blaming the press. "We could have had a deal and a victory and a unified party," moaned one. "Instead we have a president repudiated by his own party."

But if Reagan's repudiation was partly caused by what one White House aide called "tactical stupidity," it was also of his own making. Indeed, the president has recently embraced foreign policy as fervently as he pushed his economic-recovery program—and with the same inflexibility. Part of the reason for Reagan's intransigence, says one longtime adviser, is that "he's always believed that you've got to be strong before the Russians will listen to you. It's a spiritual thing with him." Moderate GOP Sen. Slade Gorton of Washington agrees: "What we heard from him was 100 percent personal conviction. There wasn't an ounce of political calculation in it."

Reagan's personal convictions, however, are fraught with serious political risks. "We're scaring everyone half to death with this nuke stuff," complains one ranking administration official. "All the talk about missiles and warheads and megatonnage has rekindled the warmonger stuff." And as last week's demonstration in Pittsburgh also points out, the perception that Reagan is cutting social programs to pay for defense increases has once again revived the "fairness" issue that has dogged him from the start of his presidency. "All of a sudden you hear we're sacrificing the Great Society on the altar of the military-industrial complex," says one Reagan official.

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